

THE SYNDROME

A. ROSS ECKLER

Morristown, New Jersey

Dr. Edward Wax carefully inserted the cassette in the player as he glanced at the other four sitting around the conference table. "I'm glad you could find the time to listen to my problem," he began. "I realize that the Psychiatric Institute is ordinarily concerned with research into phobias or psychological aberrations that have resisted treatment by the foremost psychiatrists, not the routine neuroses encountered by a GP like myself. Were it not for my neighbor, Mr. Pfund of your Institute, I suppose I should never have been given this hearing." He nodded toward the short cherubic man sitting across from him.

thing in determining what patients are examined or research undertaken. It was the bizarre nature of your patient's symptoms that I related to Professor Hjelmqvist that convinced him to listen to your tape."

"Yah," said the Professor in an accent hinting of his Scandinavian origin. "Mr. Pfund tells me that your patient speaks in an oddly stilted manner. I am very curious to see just vot you mean by this, and to aid in diagnosis I haf called in two colleagues, Dr. Alexander Gryb, a speech therapist, and Dr. Friedrich Zock, a psycholinguist. I expect," he complacently added, "we should have no trouble pinpointing the exact nature of your patient's syndrome."

Dr. Wax pressed the play button. The recorder began to whirr, and the voices of doctor and patient filled the room.

...What advice do you give new employees at the post office, Harry?

Just be very quick when fixing zip code mail.

But isn't that hard to do?

Such a job requires extra pluck and zeal from every wage-earner.

No staring out the window, is that it?

No - all you can see is five thickets of quaking aspen, box elder and juneberry lining a frozen swamp...

Dr. Wax hit the off button. The Institute members looked at each other blankly. The Professor tapped his pencil nervously on the table. "Very curious - very curious indeed. Vot do you make of it, Dr. Zock?"

"I don't know," the latter replied thoughtfully. "He certainly

seems to be a keen observer of nature. Let's hear another part of the tape."

Dr. Wax hit the fast forward, then the play button.

...So she's been very busy lately?

My girl wove six dozen plaid jackets before she quit.

What did her friend Zelda do when she heard about this?

Zelda quickly wove eight nubby flax jumpers.

What did she give you for Christmas?

Her gift box of jigsaw puzzles quickly drove me nuts...

Dr. Gryb shook his head in perplexity. "Do you think there's any significance in the fact that he always works the letter X into his answer - six, box, flax?"

Dr. Zock's eyes widened. "Yes, that's a strange compulsion, and not the only one he shows; he always uses the letter Q, and Z, and J, and..."

Professor Hjelmqvist clapped his hand to his head. "Uff course! I should haf seen it at vunce! The patient is suffering from the necessity to use efery letter of the alphabet in each sentence he utters - a pangram, I think you call it?" Dr. Zock nodded assent. "All my life, I have dreamed of being the discoverer of a syndrome new to the medical world, and I may haf found it! Who knows what this may lead to," he mused, more to himself than the others at the table, "the Freud Medal...the Nobel Prize for the Hjelmqvist syndrome..."

He stopped, aware that the others were frowning at him. "The Hjelmqvist syndrome?" cried Dr. Gryb. "I was the one who first called your attention to the repetition of a letter.." "And I," put in Dr. Zock, "built on Gryb's idea, giving you the flash of insight. What about credit for us?"

"Vell," said the professor grudgingly, "I guess we might call it the Hjelmqvist-Gryb-Zock syndrome, yah?"

"Wait a minute," cried Pfund. "Aren't you forgetting that I was the one who brought this patient to your attention? And what about Dr. Wax, who told me about it? If credit is to be given for this discovery, let it be meted out equally: I propose that it be christened the Hjelmqvist-Gryb-Zock-Pfund-Wax syndrome..."